

# KUWENTONG KARERA: WRITING ABOUT HORSERACING

By Jenny Ortuoste



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*So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
Out of the whinnying green stable  
On to the fields of praise.*

~ Dylan Thomas, from "Fern Hill" (1945)

I first became involved with the Philippine horseracing industry when I was in my early 20s. I was fresh out of the University of the Philippines

with a journalism degree, raring to prove myself as a writer, when I received the opportunity to write sports feature articles for the now-defunct news broadsheet *Manila Chronicle*.

This is how that happened: My first job out of college was as public relations officer of the Games and Amusements Board (GAB). This government agency supervises and regulates professional sports except horseracing. The agency's chairman, Jose Macachor, was an advertising guy and pulled my resume from a pile sent to J. Walter Thompson. It is this seemingly small action, perhaps even a whim on his part, that changed the course of my life. If he hadn't done that, and if I hadn't responded, I wouldn't have had all the adventures that followed.

While at GAB, my duties included writing press releases and liaising with print and TV reporters. It was at a press conference at the office that I met someone who said he could get me a gig as a freelance contributor writing features. "It's perfect for you," he urged. "Your work at GAB gives you access to sports personalities and events."

Knowing nothing about sports did not deter me from writing sports articles. If anything, I was full of confidence and sure that whatever it was, I could figure it out. I was eager to practice Hunter S. Thompson's concept of 'gonzo journalism,' which eschews the strict objectivity we were taught in j-school in favor of the personal, lived experience, and the use of an unapologetically subjective lens upon a subject. To be clear, it wasn't in the classroom that I learned about this concept; it was probably from a book in the stacks of the UP Main Library that I read about it. (The stacks area was my personal *tambayan* and comfort space until I joined the UP Journalism Club in my third year and made friends.)

While at *Chronicle*, I wrote about basketball, boxing, windsurfing, and jetskiing events assigned to me by editor Fort Yerro, who ran a sports supplement for *Chronicle* called *Sporting Life*. While covering a windsurfing

event, one of the competitors (who wasn't that much taller than me) remarked breezily (and, in hindsight, rather cheekily): "*Ang liit mo. Puwede kang hinete.*"

"*Ano ang hinete?*" I asked, and that question precipitated me down the rabbit hole that was the rest of my life and career for two decades. Writing about Philippine horseracing from the emic perspective of gonzo journalism, I became the sport's first female apprentice jockey. I married a professional jockey (and after 12 years had our marriage annulled). I had two children who I raised in a home just behind the racetrack in Makati. (I wrote about this experience in my Palanca-winning essay "The Turn for Home: Memories of Santa Ana Park.")

## My poetics

My poetics, then, counts lived experience as a necessary impetus for the creation of literary and other artistic works. It is from involvement and participation in the daily grind of working to put food on the table, contact with people from various backgrounds, interaction with them for various purposes, exposure to the new and unfamiliar (both bad and good), an awareness of the stories of others, and a conversance with the ways that people negotiate their existence and interactions that provide me with understanding about human nature and the human condition.

This is where I gain the traction to write about what matters most to me, which are narratives of real people. This is why I write primarily creative nonfiction—to bring to others' awareness the stories of others as well as my own. This sharing of perspectives allows us to gain deeper insights into what it is to live, exist, be human. It also allows me to operate from a place of authenticity, which is very important to me as this is aligned with my personal core value of truth.

I find gonzo journalism a perfect style for the way I write – nonfiction that is written creatively, steeped in lived experience, brimming with authentic truths. The term ‘gonzo’ was coined by the late journalist Bill Cardoso after he read Thompson’s article about the Kentucky Derby in *Scanlon’s Monthly* in June 1970 (Martin, 2006). The article caused waves through the establishment, in part because the accompanying illustrations by British artist Ralph Steadman were distorted, frenzied, grotesque.

“The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” Cardoso wrote to Thompson in a letter, was a breakthrough that was “pure Gonzo,” written with a capital G (Martin, 2006). The word has two dictionary meanings: the original one being “bizarre or crazy,” and the second one, that became attached to it because of Cardoso, refers to “journalistic writing of an exaggerated, subjective, and fictionalized style.” The word is rooted perhaps in the Italian *gonzo*, “foolish,” or Spanish *ganso*, “goose, fool” (Oxford Languages Dictionary) -- in Filipino, *gansa*, an animal not known in our culture for being particularly clever.

In the case of Thompson’s seminal article that shattered the staid standards of coverage that prevailed up to that day, ‘gonzo’ leans rather more toward ‘bizarre and crazy.’ This is how the article is bylined: “Written under duress by Hunter S. Thompson. Sketched with eyebrow pencil and lipstick by Ralph Steadman” (Thompson, 1970). And that’s just for starters.

The work sounds like much of the drink-fueled, drug-addled writing of the ‘60s and 70s. It wasn’t the first of its kind to appear, in terms of subjective essays, but “Derby” struck a chord in readers for its sheer audacity and raw honesty. Thompson describes his and Steadman’s adventures in obsessive, stark detail, pulling no punches no matter how unflattering to themselves and others. Describing the anticipated scene to Steadman, Thompson writes:

“Sure,” I said. “We’ll just have to be careful not to step on anybody’s stomach and start a fight.” I shrugged. “Hell, this clubhouse scene right below us will be almost as bad as the infield. Thousands of raving, stumbling drunks, getting angrier and angrier as they lose more and more money. By midafternoon they’ll be guzzling mint juleps with both hands and vomiting on each other between races. The whole place will be jammed with bodies, shoulder to shoulder. It’s hard to move around. The aisles will be slick with vomit; people falling down and grabbing at your legs to keep from being stomped. Drunks pissing on themselves in the betting lines. Dropping handfuls of money and fighting to stoop over and pick it up.”

He looked so nervous that I laughed. “I’m just kidding,” I said.

This is how I strive to write, with the same kind of unflinching and direct storytelling that is like someone conversing with you. Stephen King has mastered this technique. In his novella *The Mist* (1980), he starts this way: “This is what happened.” Simple, right? But very effective, at least it was for me. It was like he was seated right beside me, a good ole boy from Maine, spinning a yarn about the “worst heat wave in northern New England history” and the monsters that emerge from the mist referred to in the title. And this simple opening phrase has stuck with me all these years from when I first read *The Mist* as a teenager, and I have used it as a literary go-to technique since then, to create a “warm open,” as it were. In fact, rereading the earlier part of this essay, I find that I have used a variation in paragraph two.

Another writer whose straightforwardness I admire is Jack Kerouac. His personality aside (he was after all a man of his times, patriarchal and sexist), his technique of writing CNF also delivers the same directness and “warts and all” kind of honesty. His sense of rhythm and that of King’s is also what I try to emulate – King for his mastery of language, and the way it flows from sentence to sentence (this is what makes his works ‘unputdownable,’ as

countless fans have described), and Kerouac for writing the way jazz sounds. His works like *On the Road* contain the vibrant, bluesy notes of hard bop and cool jazz, mentioning by name musicians Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray, and Miles Davis, among others. Like the improvisational chords of jazz, his sentences run on for long, lung-busting riffs, punctuated by the staccato pops of phrases.

## My process

My creative process stems from my poetics in that it must be honest and genuine to the way I live my life. As someone with children to raise and a household to run on my own, most of my time is spent working at things that have remunerative compensation – teaching, churning out content for the internet, editing documents and psychological case studies. I have very little leisure to write literary or creative works. It happens when it happens.

In other words, mine is a *laissez-faire* approach. The term is French and literally means “let you do,” and is pronounced “lay-zay fair” – in my case, with emphasis on the “lazy.” I will write when I feel like it, when I want to, or have to, usually when there is a deadline for me to contribute to an anthology or generate output that will add to my accomplishments toward a promotion at work. Lazy? Yeah, fair enough. Why aren’t I more productive? Because time and energy are limited and there is no payoff for creative writing. It won’t put food on the table. One does it for the clout, for the right to say, “I am a serious writer, I am someone who contributes to the country’s literature.”

I personally do it for the headstone, for the chance to someday become immortal. Having been treated for two cancers, I feel my mortality very much. I do not know how much longer I have left on this earth, or how much time I have left to write. But I am so busy living and making a living that what I have written so far will have to do.

## My current project

My current writing project is to turn my PhD dissertation into a book that the average educated reader will enjoy. True to my lazy-fair attitude, my manuscript was approved for publication in 2018, subject to minor edits that I have not yet accomplished.

Tentatively titled *Kulturang Karera: The Culture and Communication of Horseracing*, my book in progress is a description of the culture, commerce, and communication of Philippine horseracing. Interspersed with facts and figures are anecdotes that bring this subculture to light, that foreground the personal experiences of racetrack folk as they continually construct, maintain, destroy, and re-construct their social order.

What I am struggling with is how to turn an academic work into something that will be of interest to others who are not as geeky or nerdy as I am, and that will allow me to share as accurately and faithfully as possible the vibrancy, urgency, and sheer excitement of the world I lived in for over 20 years. How do I make others feel what I do as I watch horses thunder down the homestretch toward the wire, fans screaming themselves hoarse, betting tickets clenched in their fists, eyes bulging at the sight of men and beasts running toward victory or defeat?

Another reason I procrastinated on this project (aside from life happening to me) is that I do not think I write well enough – I don't have the vocabulary, the mastery of language, the ability to pluck the thoughts and memories out of my head and spread them on paper in such a way that the narrative is as alive to others as it is to me.

All I can do is try my best. I hope I can do justice to the people and horses, and to the stories they lived.

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# EXCERPTS FROM *KULTURANG KARERA: THE CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION OF HORSERACING*

by Jenny Ortuoste

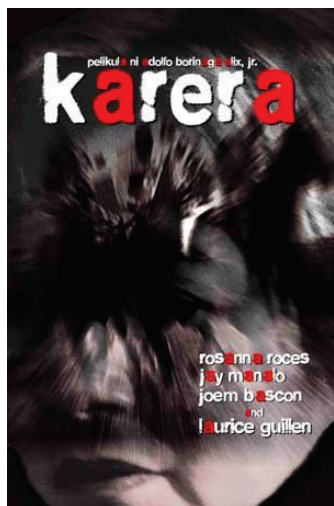
## Horseracing in Film and Television

In addition to various print formats, the narratives of racing also appear in popular culture through the media of film and television. In film, among the most famous that center on racing are *National Velvet* (1944) starring Elizabeth Taylor and Mickey Rooney. Taylor defies convention and rides her horse in the dangerous and highly intense Grand National Steeplechase. Mickey Rooney plays a trainer in *The Black Stallion* (1979). The most well-known racing movies in the Philippines are *Seabiscuit* (2003) and *Secretariat* (2010), both based on the stories of famous champion racehorses and their people - owners, trainers, jockeys - who overcame large obstacles to win big.

On television, Animal Planet has aired *Jockeys* (2009), a twelve-episode reality TV series on riders, while *Luck* (2011), a series about racetrack life, was canceled after three horses died during production.

There have been several Philippine movies with scenes set at the racetrack, with most of the early ones Fernando Poe Jr. and Chiquito starrers. Both actors were noted horseowners and operated racing stables at the old Santa Ana Park in Makati. Chiquito (whose real name was Augusto Pangan) was also a professional jockey and often rode his own horses in races.

The subject remains interesting to filmmakers. *Ging Gang Gooly Giddyap: I Love You Daddy* (1994) was a comedy that starred Nova Villa, Jimmy Santos, Manilyn Reynes, and Romnick Sarmenta, who played a jockey and Manilyn's love interest, with a talking horse possessed by the spirit of the girl's dead father. In *Kabayo Kids* (1990) comedians Vic played a jockey, Tito a coachman (*kutsero*), and Joey a blacksmith (*panday*), but the equine element was confined to the background as the nominal occupations of the three *bidas*, who were costumed superheroes fighting against a formulaic villain.



Poster for the film *Karera* (2009)

The indie film *Karera* (2009) starred Rosanna Roces and Jay Manalo (both *kareristas* in real life, they used to ask me for racing tips via text message); it tells of a family involved in illegal horserace betting as “bookies”. The Vice Ganda movie *Petrang Kabayo* (2010), a remake of the Roderick Paulate starrer *Petrang Kabayo at ang Pilyang Kuting* (1988), starred the flamboyant comedian as a wealthy and cruel employer (“Peter/Petra”) who was magically turned into a horse to learn an important life lesson. Some scenes were shot at San Lazaro

Leisure Park (SLLP); one scene was a contrived horse race that had Petra, transformed into a *kalesa* horse, winning over the much larger Thoroughbreds for racing by talking to them and convincing them to let her win.

Perhaps the movie with the most verisimilitude to racing, however slight, was the comedy *Isang Platitong Mani* (1985), starring, among others, comedian Bert “Tawa” Marcelo, singer Rico J. Puno, billiards king Amang Parica, and star jockey Eduardo “Boboc” C. Domingo Jr.

At the time, Boboc was a minor celebrity in the sports world. As a good-looking “gentleman jockey” (he had taken master’s degree units at De La Salle University and came from a prominent Ilonggo family, the Coscolluelas, on his mother’s side), he was a rarity in the sport where the jockeys at the time were mostly only high-school graduates. In *Isang Platito...*, he played a kalesa driver and used *salitang karera* some of his lines - *labas* to urge his *pangkalesa* horse to do well, *pengko* and *panis* to refer disparagingly to a billiards player—and wore a full *panlaban* (actual race) outfit of his own—helmet, silks, whip, pristine *pandemontar* (riding pants) and boots in a scene where he drives a kalesa.

In these films, the use of horses, racing, or racing-related subjects is merely to provide a setting for the narratives, in the sense of, “Where would you usually find a horse? At a racetrack.” These films lean heavily on the popular trope of “pride cometh before a fall,” and use the devices of the supernatural and fantasy - a talking horse (*Ging Gang Gooly...*), a ghost horse (*Petra...* 2010), and, in both *Petras*, a goddess and god of horses (“*Diokabayo*”) and humans temporarily transformed into horses to expiate transgressions and learn important values. In these films there is no delving into the world of *karera*, but rather a subversion of its material culture - horses, racetrack, races, stables, *diviza* (racing skills)—to accommodate storylines written along mainstream myths and stereotypes. The unfamiliarity of the racing environment interests and titillates, and that is the purpose for its use. To date, there are no productions, whether film or television, that deliver an accurate and authentic portrayal of *karera*.

In sum, horses have a special role in the narratives of films. Horses are held in awe and respect, and they are often the creature chosen to be endowed with magical properties; they are perceived as good and patient, *kawawa* (as a beast of burden, as in *Petra...*, 1988) and *kinakawawa* (as seen in the horse abused by the main character’s father in *Petra...* 1988, and by

the main character in Petra...2010). Horses are perceived to accept, in dumb acquiescence, human impositions and demands for labor, and display defiance only when experiencing unkindness and cruelty. Thus the horse, particularly in the films mentioned, is a metaphor for the ordinary Filipino, who bears all things with patience, but struggles when it is all too much and has become an injustice.

This theme also illustrates the folk wisdom “be kind to others,” valorizing character traits of helpfulness and kindness to animals, while *pagamalupit* is punished, if not by human means, then by supernatural.

The literature implies that the racing community has its own interesting narratives, the stories of people and horses that reflect the ups and downs of life in the mainstream, while offering a touch of the exotic and unfamiliar through the depiction of the community’s own mores, values, norms, language, structure, hierarchy, and way of life. It is evident that racing has an entire and complete culture of its own, impenetrable to outsiders unless explained, while remaining embedded in the mainstream culture of society and reflecting to a varying extent the cultural attributes of that society.

There in the dichotomy of belonging/otherness lies the glamor and attraction as well as the continuing fascination of the public with the racing world.

### **On Norms and Values**

The members of a community hold certain values and norms in common, valorizing some above others. A “value” considers “good” and “bad,” and what is important and what is not; it is more abstract and general than a norm, which provides rules of behavior in specific situations; it is “the way we do things around here,” and is not necessarily connected to ethical practices or ideas.



Horses racing down the stretch in one of the races of the MARHO Founders' Cup, an event I managed. The festival was held at Metroturf Racecourse in Malvar, Batangas, March 28, 2015.

#### A. Pagpapahalaga sa pamilya

One value prevalent in horseracing that of familism (also familialism), that places a priority on the family and family values. In *karera*, being “a family man” is a value, although the cultural norm tolerates infidelity - having a “girlfriend” or mistress is accepted, part of manhood rites of passage - “*Lalaki kasi ako, ganoon talaga,*” under the Filipino machismo mentality.

In such cases, the girlfriend or mistress should not supplant the role of the wife for the sake of family harmony. Leaving the wife for the mistress is frowned upon - “*Hindi baleng magdagdag, huwag lang magbawas.*” Marital separations that occur under violent or tragic circumstances are considered *malas* -- unlucky. A jockey who abandoned his wife and children for “the other woman” and refused to give his family financial support earned the negative opinion of the community, and he was dropped by some of his horseowners at the time - “*Mali ang ginawa niya sa pamilya niya. Malas ‘yun sa kabayo.*”

Another of his horseowners, learning later on from the wife that the jockey was not supporting his children, told her, "*Bakit hindi mo sinabi sa akin agad? Sana nakatulong ako na kausapin siya.*" This horseowner did speak to the jockey, who was compelled to give his family support, at least for some time. This once more shows the interconnectivity of the personal with the professional life in racing, and the responsibility that horseowners feel towards their employees and other racing folk lower down the hierarchy.

This is a reflection of a common perception that karera folk are a family - "*Isang pamilya lang tayo.*" Racing folk seem to know everyone else's business; there are hardly any secrets in this world - everyone knows who has a mistress, that the wife became angry, that his child dropped out of school, and so on. It is not a violation of privacy for someone to ask another personal questions, because they are not *ibang tao*, they are *pamilya*. In this sense, responsibility for fellow racing folk is an extension of one's responsibilities to their own families.

Because of this sense of family, it is often assumed that everyone else possesses the same knowledge of racing matters. A veteran jockey tells of the time he asked directions to Jun Almeda's farm in Batangas, which he had never visited. He was told, "*Sa tabi iyon ng farm ni Eric Tagle.*" When Mr. Almeda himself was for directions, he said, "*Alam na niya [veteran jockey] kung saan ang farm ko - tabi lang nung kay Eric Tagle.*" It was assumed that everyone knows where Eric Tagle's farm is, as a sort of landmark. The veteran jockey ended up having to meet up with trailer drivers near the area, where he was finally given exact directions after reiterating that he really did not know the location of Eric Tagle's farm.

## B. Pagiging mapagkukop

This feeling of social responsibility is the manifestation of another racing value that requires community members to help each other. It's been described as "we protect our own." Again referring to the previous case, horseowners and other industry top honchos helped the abandoned jockey's wife by giving her work - first as a writer, then, as she learned more about the industry, by giving her other, bigger roles. A then-Philracom [Philippine Racing Commission] official said of her, "*Kawawa naman siya, kailangan tulungan. Hindi sila dapat iniwang mag-iina.*"

In the same manner, groups within the industry develop ways to benefit their members. The jockeys regularly stage charity events to raise money for the Disabled Jockeys Fund every year on Jockeys Day, a racing festival held sometime in the summer. In 2015, they kicked off the first annual Jockeys Footrace, a brainchild of veteran rider Antonio "Oyet" B. Alcasid Jr. He had seen videos of American jockeys breaking from gates sans horses and running a few meters on the track to raise money for charity. That year, I pitched in to help by soliciting sponsors who donated P5,000 per jockey; they could name the jockey they wanted to race and have him wear a shirt that they supplied (most sent shirts with company logos). We filled a gate at Metroturf with jockeys who were raring to run, the shy ones looking down at their feet and not making eye contact with the crowd, the zanier ones – Patricio "Patty" Dilema the foremost among them – pretending to be horses and kicking at their "sotas" guiding them to the gate. "*E di wow!*" the crowd roared at Patty's antics; he preened at the use of his catchphrase. It was one of the younger jockeys who won that first footrace; he'd been a track star in high school. For his efforts he received a motorcycle donated by Metroturf. A good time was had by all, and the second footrace this year (2016) at Santa Ana Park was just as successful.

Horseowners, for their part, help each other by siding with their fellows to convince other groups to take a particular policy stand. In line with this, racing folk feel comfortable approaching other *taga-karera* or *kareristas* in influential positions in politics, government, or business to ask for favors on the basis of the community relationship - "*Taga-karera din po ako. Ako 'yung teller noon sa Santa Ana sa Makati, naalala niyo? Tulungan niyo naman ako.*" The belongingness to the group extends itself, as a passport, as it were, into in-group members' lives outside racing.

### C. Pagkakapantay-pantay ng mga kasarian

In terms of gender, the majority of horseowners are male, from 95 to 99 percent in any given year (horseowner registrations with Philracom are accomplished yearly, thus the names on the roster change). Some of the registered women horseowners are not owners in their own right but fronts for their male relatives wanting to spread ownership around to skirt rules on coupled entries. There are very few women owners genuinely involved in the sport on their own account - among them former congresswomen Maria Consuelo "Baby" Puyat-Reyes who was active during the 1980s and '90s, and Melaine Habla at present, all the more a rarity because she is young, in her 20s. This gender disparity is reflected in all professions at the track. There are no female exercise riders or jockeys at the present. In the modern history of the sport, there have been only three female apprentices of the Philippine Jockeys Academy - I was the first, in 1991 - and of the three, only one finished the course and graduated to journeyman, Analyn Reloto. She was not successful in her local career and is now an exercise rider in Japan.

I was also the first and only in two racing-related occupations: female assistant racing manager of a racing club (Manila Jockey Club, in 2005 to 2007) and racing writer (from early 2000s to present). I was the second female broadcaster after Jay Rodriguez in the 1990s, although she was more



of an on-camera talent rather than an expert in racing, the same with the lone female racecaster at present, Lea Forbes at SLLP. This situation is linked to several factors: disinclination of women to enter what is perceived as “a man’s world,” the perceived shortage of career opportunities in racing, and the lack of awareness that this world even exists.

There are a few women *sotas* (grooms), who entered the profession within the past decade or so. One is Gigi Dacanay, who rose to become a stable manager. In terms of gender equality, opportunities within the community are given to those who identify as LGBTQ - there are a few gay male *sotas*, one who calls himself “Mayumi”; Dacanay and her partner are both lesbians. All three work for JAL Racing. Horseowner Jeci A. Lapus believes that women make efficient *sotas* and stable managers because they “are cleaner and take better care of things;” gay men, he says, are “*maayos at madetalye*,” adding, “*Wala akong pakialam sa kasarian, basta alagaan nila ng mabuti ang kabayo ko.*”

Taga-karera and kareristas themselves welcome women into the community, seeing them as novelties - “*Ang cute nila*,” and, in the case of broadcasters, “*Para maiba naman, hindi iyong puro lalaki ang nasa panel, nakakasawa.*” I myself had no idea that I could be a panelist; it took the encouragement of people in racing, primarily PRCI’s then-racing manager Fulton Su, to convince me I could learn the ropes, again, in hands-on fashion.

In the end, to the community, what matters is that the job gets done, and done well - “*Kahit sino ang nasa panel, basta malinaw ang boses at alam ang pinagsasabi niya*,” “*Kahit babae ang hinete, basta magaling magdala ng kabayo at maipapanalo niya.*”

#### D. Pagiging mapagkumbaba

With so many occasions and opportunities within karera to brag and show off, humility is deemed an important virtue to avoid being termed *mayabang* or *arogante*. Jockeys modestly shrug off praise for wins by saying “*Chamba lang*” or “*Sinuwerte lang ako, pare*,” even if the jockey himself believes that it was his skill and mastery that led to the victory. Even star jockeys congratulated at the awarding ceremony and showered with praise murmur similar phrases of self-deprecation. It might be false modesty, but displaying boastful behavior is a breach of racing etiquette and, in the case of jockeys who grandstand during a race or fail to salute racing stewards, penalized with a fine.

Among jockeys, the boastful ones are shunned. Says a veteran jockey:

“You remember [name of jockey]? He’s so young but he became *mayabang*. He said in an interview that he is the best jockey now riding! So now we just ignore him. Also two other guys [names omitted]. The automatic *pakain* I told you about, when one of us wins? We don’t do it when it’s them. We don’t congratulate them. We’re just silent. *Iba silang makisama, eh*.”

A humble demeanor is also expected of trainers and horseowners, especially in public. A trainer who struts too much “in your face” or makes disparaging remarks about his opponents is *mayabang*. A horseowner who displays excessive glee when hoisting a trophy is *mayabang*. As racing folk often advise, “*Renda-renda lang*” - do things in moderation. (The term means “reining in,” or controlling your mount with the reins.)

It is also considered *malas* to brag - it might jinx the next outing and lead to a loss. “*Mayabang kasi siya, eh*,” the community might say about

a boastful rider or trainer who suffers a loss. The concept is also linked to divine retribution - “*Ayan, kinarma sila tuloy.*”

Even among *kareristas*, winning a wager is ascribed to *suwerte* even if everyone is aware that it was *galing sa diskarte* (strategic ability) that led to the win; the fact is known, but it is considered appropriate behavior to say it was *chamba lang*, in a way also consoling others for their loss by implying that they too might win next time if they are as lucky, in this manner ensuring that relationships are not ruffled by behavior that might be misconstrued as unsportsmanlike or ungentlemanly.



Nemesis approaches the finish line in one of the races at the MARHO Ruby Festival, held Nov. 30, 2014 at Manila Jockey Club in Carmona, Cavite. I was the event manager and very proud of our beautiful event banner in the background.

## On Roles and Hierarchies

Roles within the racing community fall in either of two aspects – the manufacture of a product (the races), and the consumption of the product (watching the races and wagering on them). Those responsible for the conduct and management of the races are the *taga-karera*, and those who enjoy the races and bet on them are the *karerista*. Both together make up the racing community and belong to the in-group; the outgroup is called *hindi taga-karera* and *hindi karerista*.

## A. Taga-karera

Because they are intimately connected with the conduct of the sport, taga-karera have a slightly more prestigious status within the group as insiders, in the sense of being more on the inside than kareristas.

Identified as taga-karera by consensus are jockeys, trainers, grooms, helpers, stablehands, ranch hands, and their families - in other words, those who work as employees (*tauhan*). Many of them have been involved in these occupations for generations, in this way assuring their progeny of livelihoods, racing being the “family business” so to speak.

There are families that have produced jockeys and trainers for generations, the most prominent being the Guce family. The racing professions tend to run in families because the skills and knowledge are passed on within the families, and to some extent also because of genetics, in the case of jockeys.

The demands of the sport require jockeys to be as light as possible to ease the burden on the horse, which is an expensive animal to buy and maintain; a short person would be lighter, so racing folk who are short tend to become jockeys. They then marry short women and have short children, and this was often the pattern for generations in many families. On average jockeys are five feet two inches tall; star jockey Jonathan Hernandez, at five feet four inches, is considered too tall, but he has the gift of making weight without difficulty. This is the only role that has a physical requirement.

However, jockeys have the advantage of not being confined to that particular role for life; many jockeys, at the end of their riding career, transition to become trainers and stable managers, and are considered to be effective and knowledgeable trainers because they can ride, unlike many trainers - the tall ones - who cannot.



A group of jockeys posing just before they compete in the 43rd PCSO Presidential Gold Cup (2015) at SLLP. Jonathan Hernandez is on the right.

Others considered as *taga-karera* are exercise riders, grooms, and the helpers - jockey helpers and *sota* [groom] helpers. Most exercise riders are failed jockeys - those who became too tall or heavy to ride competitively, those who flunked their apprentice training, those who were not successful as journeymen, those who had personal concerns such as drug use and attitude problems. A few who love riding horses took up this job because they had no other means of livelihood.

The profession of groom tends to run in families as well but to a lesser extent compared to the other professions, because anyone who loves animals and has an aptitude for getting along with them can learn to be a groom.

Those who self-identify as *taga-karera* also call themselves *batang karera* (children of racing), to emphasize deeper their intimate connection with the community.

A *batang karera* is a person who is born into racing, whose father is a jockey, trainer, or other racetrack worker; the term is also used to refer to *karerista* who have been involved in racing for a long time - "*Bata pa ako,*

*sinasama na ako ng tatay ko sa karera, ako runner niya. Kaya masasabi mong batang karera ako, dahil ito na ang kinalakihan ko.”*

If there are those in the community who are considered employees, there are those who are the employers - the *amo* (literally, “master”) because of their financial and economic power; included, therefore, under this category are the “big bettors” who outlay comparatively large amounts.

Are horseowners *taga-karera*? In the sense that they are an essential component of the community, yes. There would be no races without horses, and there are no horses for racing without horseowners. They infuse large amounts of capital investment and effort into the sport, and many of them are actively involved in racing matters, such as policy direction and marketing through events.



Here I am with horseowners Vicente Go Bon and Antonio Tan at the MARHO Founders Cup event that I managed. March 28, 2015, Metroturf Racecourse, Batangas.

However, among racetrack employees, there is a clear divide. A veteran jockey described horseowners this way: “They are the *patrón*. The masters. The feudal lords. They are in a class of their own, I think.” It is a division based on economics rather than social class because while there are horseowners from socially prominent families, there are also those who

elevated themselves from “rags to riches,” and both have equal stature in the community. The only requirement to belong to this group is to own horses, and the more horses owned, the higher the prestige; owning and maintaining a breeding ranch confers bonus points.

Some horseowners operate from what a former star trainer described as a “feudal lord mentality” in their interactions with racetrack workers. Once, when discussing a looming jockey strike, several horseowners said: “*Kailangan sumakay sila, huwag na silang mag-iinarte,*” “*Mga empleyado natin sila, dapat i-compel sila na sumakay;*” they refused to validate the jockeys’ concerns and instead wanted to force them to ride so that they would not lose potential income.

Another horseowner told an employee of his horseowners’ group: “*Hindi ka puwedeng mag-resign hangga’t nariyan ako. Pag nag-resign ako, doon ka lang puwedeng mag-resign din.*” The same employee was told by another horseowner and former officer of that same group: “*Aalis na ako sa karera at bibitawan ko na itong [responsible role in the group]. Mag-resign ka na rin kasabay ko.*”

One horseowner who took his seigneurial privileges to the extreme was Fernando Poe Jr. The action star, who owned a large stable in Santa Ana Park, would often show up at his stable to watch the races. He enjoyed drinking, but when in his cups would sometimes behave erratically.

A former jockey told me that there was a time – it must have been in the ‘70s or early ‘80s - that FPJ took out his gun and started shooting at his jockey’s feet, exhorting him: “*Sayaw! Sayaw!*” The poor fellow did so to avoid the rain of bullets, but he was still shot in the foot. FPJ paid him off handsomely and gave financial support for the months that the jockey was recuperating. Similar incidents happened over the years, and that rider, it was said, amassed cash, furniture, and appliances from FPJ’s largesse. When

I asked the former jockey, “*E bakit pumayag iyong hinete niya na ganunin siya? Ano ngayon kung sikat si FPJ?*” he looked at me like I was as dumb as a bag of oats. “*Amo siya, e! Ganoon ‘yun!*”

In their role of patrón, horseowners may show their benevolent side, and it is a responsibility that many of them take seriously. When a racetrack worker is in need of a loan or handout for their child’s tuition or a hospital bill, or help in other matters, they can approach their horseowner, who will often oblige and make other efforts to assist them - use their connections to get financial assistance from government agencies for a hospital bill or find work for a newly graduated son or daughter. Many taga-karera sing the praises of one amo or another as having stood by them when needed.

Buying and keeping horses is expensive and horseowners are, without exception, those with money to burn - *mahaba ang pisi*. Financial capability is essential when your important pedigreed horse that cost a million pesos can fall down dead tomorrow. Many horseowners are the heads of their own businesses, executives in large corporations, or powerful politicians. They would not have risen to the top positions of their companies, established successful and lucrative businesses, or dominated their fields of endeavor unless they had certain character traits that drove them to achieve and accomplish.

It is these characteristics that also reinforce the patriarchal nature of karera culture - “*Boss kasi sila, eh.*” “When in doubt, ask your amo” is the watchword. Many horseowners are strongly opinionated and involved in the lives of their workers - giving advice, sometimes instructions, on life matters, not just racing. “*Hindi muna mag-aasawa iyang anak mo - patapusin mo muna ng pag-aaral!*” This is also one example of how the intimacy of track life results in an interweaving of the professional and personal, to the point sometimes where one is inextricable from the other.



## B. Karerista

People travel all the way to the racetracks and OTBs (off-track betting stations) for one reason, and that is to watch races and bet on them. Thus their activities at these venues are in line with this purpose. They may be seen studying racing programs, texting inside sources such as horseowners, trainers, jockeys, grooms, and tipsters for racing tips, and scribbling their *ruta* (betting combinations) on scraps of paper. From time to time they glance up at the many monitors that line the interior walls of the building to view the betting matrix (a grid of numbers that show estimated dividends for betting combinations).

When the bettors are ready, they line up in front of the betting windows to place their bets, then watch the race from the viewing area beside the track or on the monitors.

The exchange of money through betting is a significant activity in this sport; economics, therefore, is a key concept in this context, to a greater degree than in other sports that have no formal betting element. Racegoers communicate to each other, in words and actions, their excitement and anticipation upon placing their bets, suspense while watching the race, and elation upon winning or disappointment upon loss.

Since horseracing is not a mere game of chance that relies on the turn of the card or roll of the die, as in casino gambling, but a sport that requires knowledge about myriad factors, being able to apply analytical methods to come up with winners leads to a feeling of vindication and even smugness when one is proven right and goes to the betting window to collect dividends. Losing a bet is equated not only with the loss of money but also with being wrong, with error. Then the tendency is to try, try again.

At the track, there is a camaraderie among the patrons, of belonging to a particular, special group – *kami* (us) – *na taga-karera* or *karerista*, who

are not understood by *sila* (them) o *hindi taga-karera* and *hindi karerista*. But then that is one of the draws of the sport - the sense of participating in the arcane and mysterious, and tasting the flavor of the forbidden.

